DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 099 UD 022 824

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TITLE Ethnicity and Human Rights: An Organizational and Individual Perspective.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 17p.; Paper prepared for the Annual Regional Conference of the National Association of Interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies (Pomona, CA, November 13-14, 1980).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Civil Rights; *Ethnic Groups; Foreign Countries; *Minority Groups; Organizations (Groups); Political Issues; *Racial Discrimination; Slavery; *Social Change; Urbanization; *World Problems
IDENTIFIERS Amnesty International; Anti Slavery Society; Minority Rights Group; *United States

ABSTRACT

Despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, the issue of the human rights of ethnic minority groups is widely ignored in the United States--both in policy and as an issue worthy of examination. In this country and abroad, violations of human rights continue to take place regularly; minority group members are denied many of the basic rights, such as the right to health, to food, to clothing and housing, to free expression, and to self determination. At present, there are three major organizations that address the concern for ethnicity and human rights worldwide: the Anti-Slavery Society, the Minority Rights Group, and Amnesty International. In addition, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its subcommission on slavery and native peoples deserves mention. As the social and demographic trends of urbanization and urban decay threaten the very existence of ethnic minority populations, it is imperative that more individuals and organizations address the issue of human rights for these groups. (GC)

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Ethnicity and Human Rights: An Organizational and Individual Perspective

by

George E. Carter

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ETHNICITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS:
AN ORGANIZATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

by
George E Carter
for
Third Annual NAIES Regional Conference
Cal Poly Pomona, Nov. 13-14, 1980

ARTICLE I of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in December, 1948, holds: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." ARTICLE II stipulates that everyone is entitled to the rights set forth in the Declaration "...without distinction of any kind," including race, colour, sex, language.[1] Yet, in the view of many American ethnic spokespersons the question of human rights and ethnicity has been and still is one of the most neglected aspects of the revival of ethnicity as a factor in American life. In fact, in some ethnic circles there is doubt about concern for human rights as overly abstract, international, and a feeling that ethnic groups need to concentrate on purely American issues.

James H. Williams in the October, 1980, issue of the National Association of Interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies Newsletter, notes: "There has been little or no consideration given to the concept of ethnicity as it relates to the issues of human rights." The liberalism of the French and American revolutions as well as the Marxist tradition "...have ignored the impact of ethnicity," preferring to defend the individual from the state and for the Marxist defending the "proletariate from capitalist exploiters."[2]

Williams speaks of the myth of the supposed basic truth expressed more than 200 years ago "...all are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights" for it has never applied to "colored ethnics in the United States." The American concern for rights had more to do with property and material gains

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protection than with the individual American. Williams calls for the lifting of the national conscience.[3] Why now? The present American mood appears to be drifting away from human rights at a very basic grass-roots level.

Reverend Ben Chavis, the acknowledged leader of the Wilmington 10, released from prison in 1979, wrote in 1978 that

> In the United States the present reality for millions of Black Americans, Native American Indians, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Asian Americans and other oppressed national minorities is that the violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms are common place...There are literally thousands of people imprisoned solely because of their race and poverty.[4]

For nearly ten years the state of North Carolina was allowed to violate the Constitution of the United States, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Helsinki Final Act Conference on Human Rights.[5] And you ask, why now?

Gerald R. Gill writes that:

> The past several years, from 1977 to the present, have revealed a clear shift in the attitudes of members of Congress, many leading intellectuals and much of the American public toward both social welfare programs and strategies designed to improve the lives and livelihoods of blacks, other minorities, and the poor.... Instead of compassion, one witnesses hostility towards efforts to reduce economic inequities and to overcome the effects of past discrimination....It is not too much to suggest that behind this mania is a growing feeling of meanness....[6]

Why now? If Americans are unwilling to support social welfare programs for racial/ethnic groups, it is highly unlikely that Americans will be concerned with their human rights. In fact, many Americans, who witnessed the recent 1980 election results, may have difficulty viewing ethnic people as human beings. And we ask again, why now?

In the American experience there have been very few ethnic/racial organizations with serious interest in human rights and ethnicity. On the other hand, there have been many ethnic/racial groups interested in civil rights, which are not necessarily

the same. In fact, if civil rights groups had been interested in human rights and worked to establish ties with human rights organizations, then the American experience in this field might be entirely different. Human rights, in western societies, has traditionally implied an inherent set of fundamental rights which all humans have simply by being human. Civil rights has implied the intervention of the state or nation and has usually involved protecting the individual from attempts to deny or infringe on such rights. Civil rights are thus protected by law and there is nothing inherent about them.[7] Philip Mason, long associated with the Institute for Race Relations in England, speaks of legal rights and ideal rights. Legal rights can be enforced in the courts of law and ideal rights are those which people have in a just society and are inherent in all human beings.[8]

Human rights, as used herein, refers to the "ideal" rights basic to human existence: a) the right to health - both physical and mental; b) the right to social security; c) the right to clothing and housing; d) the right to food; e) the right to freedom of association; f) the right to work; g) the right to education; h) the right to participate in cultural life; and i) the right of self-determination.[9] These are not abstract rights in the sense of life-liberty-the pursuit of happiness -- these are basic human rights which all human beings have by virtue of their humanity.

Further, in the United States, as elsewhere, we need acceptance and recognition of the International Bill of Human Rights which contains the model for a global community that is at peace with itself. Instead, we have a situation in which two-thirds of the world's population is denied the right to an adequate standard of living and some 500 million are denied the right to be free from hunger.[10]

Ethnocentrism, the conviction that one's own group has extraordinary value, linked with a suspicion of anything unknown or different, may be the downfall of society as we know it in the United States. In this country, ethnocentrism

permeates the home, books, newspapers, schools, churches, and most other social institutions. Prejudice and acts of discrimination have come to provide excuses for exploitation of other classes, races, and women. What many Americans forget is that most inter-ethnic conflict results, not from pluralism, but rather from dedication to the status quo and an imbalance of power which has racial/ethnic groups at the bottom by design.[11]

As a country, as ethnicians, as teachers, as administrators in ethnic and minority studies programs, we need to strive to create an informed public opinion which serves as the only real safeguard for human rights. We need to demonstrate that freedom in society, above all else, means that we recognize the justice and creativity of conflict, difference, and diversity. We need to seek an environment of mutual respect where integration will mean "...equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of tolerance." Impossible, not really. We need to act now. We need to strive to have everyone judged in one race classification, - human. Gandhi declared some years ago that civilization will be judged by the way minorities are treated.[12] We need to push hard to make up for lost time if we are to be judged by that criterion alone. There is not a single organization in this land that gives serious consideration to human rights and ethnicity. On a broader scale, there are a very few organizations in the world that give attention to ethnicity and human rights. But, there are some, and that gives us faint hope.

By far the oldest organization with specific concern for ethnicity and human rights is The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights and its Committee for Indigenous People, based in London, England. This is the modern day version of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society and the Aborigines Protection Society, both founded in the early nineteenth century. The present day group is a direct descendent, and through its consultative status with the United Nations strives to improve the status of oppressed people throughout the world.[13]

The present day Anti-Slavery Society has three specific goals: 1) The elimination of all forms of slavery and forced labor. 2) The defence of the interests of both oppressed and threatened indigenous peoples. 3) The promotion of human rights in accord with the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.... The Society has increasingly taken on human rights advocacy "...including those of people neither enslaved nor indigenous," but victims who have no other voice. Diplomacy and publicity are the tools of the society and with long experience the officers and members know how to use these weapons well.[14]

Since 1975 the organization has prepared twenty-one reports covering a range of oppression that most of us can not even conceive: hunting and killing - enslavement of Ache Indians of Paraguay; forced labor in Equatorial Guinea; debt bondage of the Andoke, a South American ethnic group; traffic of persons in Hong-Kong; the dispossession, oppression and killing of peasants in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Bolivia; the condition of tin workers in Bolivia; bonded labor in India; child labor in Morocco, Columbia, India, Hong-Kong, and many others. The Anti-Slavery Society became a serious thorn in the side of the Soviet Union in 1977 to the point that an official complaint and motion was made to have its consultative status revoked. The charge was that the Anti-Slavery Society, Amnesty International and the International League for Human Rights, "systematically abused their consultative status in order to slander socialist countries."[15] The resolution did not pass or even receive serious consideration except by socialist countries, as defined by the Soviet Union.

In 1978 the Ford Foundation awarded the Anti-Slavery Society a substantial grant for three years of research and new reports on oppression in various parts of the world. That work is well underway and will include two reports with reference to the United States, one on American Indians and their status in their native land, and the second on the utilization of "servants" by United Nations delegates and

consels in the United States. Both of these reports could stimulate major controversy and they are eagerly awaited.

Two other organizations that have made important inroads on behalf of oppressed ethnic groups and individuals are Amnesty International, and the Minority Rights Group, both based in London, England, but with offices in the United States. The Minority Rights Group was formed in 1972 as an independent and international non-governmental body to work on behalf of all those denied human dignity and human rights. Registered as a trust in London where its base office was and still is located, the group's scope is world-wide.[16]

The individual behind the Minority Rights Group, its Director from the start, is Ben Whitaker. Formerly a lawyer, lecturer in law, and a Labor Party member of the British Parliament from Hampstead, he also served as Junior Minister for Overseas Development from 1966 to 1970. He has written on the police, crime and society, parks for people, but since 1972 he has devoted nearly all his energies to the Minority Rights Group.[17]

The Minority Rights Group has two major goals. First, "...by investigating and publishing facts...it aims to help the position of persecuted or disadvantaged ethnic, religious, or cultural minorities, (or majorities) in any country." Secondly, "...by its work it hopes to develop an international conscience with regard to minorities treatment and human rights...."[18]

The M.R.G. has no formal membership. Nevertheless, its supporters include persons of nearly every race, religion, nationality, and political view. The reports published by the organization have been universally hailed for their objectivity and accuracy. The politics of any given situation are avoided at all costs. Its base philosophy has been stated by its Director:

> Each and all of us, as an individual, is a minority. The really unforgiveable inhumanity, I believe, is our habit of viewing a person not as himself, but distorted by a group judgment generated by often tribal emotions.[19]

The organization has recently opened offices in Canada and the United States and is actively seeking supporters in both countries.

The third group, and by far the best known, is Amnesty International. Winner of a Nobel Peace Prize, this organization dates back to 1961 and was founded in London, England. The key figure behind the group was Peter Benenson, a prominent lawyer in England. An article by Benenson in the London Observer newspaper, May 28, 1961, drew attention to the large number of people throughout the world who were being imprisoned solely because of their opinions. The article concluded: "Pressure of opinion a hundred years ago brought about the emancipation of the slaves. It is now for man to insist upon the same freedom for his mind as he won for his body."[20] The primary concern was and still is "prisoners of conscience" without regard to color, around the world. Prisoner of conscience is defined as one physically prevented by imprisonment from expressing their opinions. The primary goals: 1) ultimately to get the prisoner released from jail, usually by a massive public pressure campaign; and 2) to aid the families of prisoners if they can and in what ways they can which are largely dictated by the government imprisoning.[21]

In July, 1961, a meeting of national sections of already established groups was held in Luxembourg. Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, and Great Britain took part in the meeting. There are now over thirty national sections. In October, 1961, a third meeting was held in London and established the basic aim for the organization as "...universal implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights..." and articles nine and ten "...of the European Convention of the Rights of Man which guarantee liberty of religion, opinion and expression."[22]

Amnesty International has consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. In 1975 it claimed over 15,000 individual members, 700 groups and twenty-one national sections. The "Group" is the basic working organization of Amnesty, needs at least three members, and each group adopts three

prisoners chosen for them by the Secretariate. Groups are never assigned prisoners from their own country.[23] Monitoring of periodicals was and is another important Group activity, but more so in the early days of the organization.[24]

The work of Amnesty International has been impressive over the years all over the world, with some glaring exceptions, including the United States. The intervention Amnesty made on behalf of the Wilmington 10 in North Carolina was their first key victory in the United States and this happened in 1979. The Wilmington 10 were in fact adopted as political prisoners of conscience by Amnesty and appeals on their behalf were made from nearly every corner of the world.[25]

Within the United Nations' structure there is one other organization that deserves mention regarding ethnicity and human rights, namely, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its subcommission on slavery and native peoples, both coming under the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). Organizations granted NGO status with the Council must be concerned with economic, social, cultural, educational, health, scientific, technological problems and related matters "...and to questions of human rights."[26]

There is no American ethnic-human-or civil rights organization that has NGO consultative status with the United Nations. Two years ago when the Council heard representations from indigenous peoples, the American Indian Spokespersons were heard as delegates of international groups based outside the United States.[27] There is a need here that desperately requires attention, and as soon as possible.

Human rights are a very individual, personal matter. There are many who believe that societies' disregard for human rights will cost us dearly in the long run. Given the alienation of ethnic people, especially those in urban centers, the catastrophe we face as a society may -- no will -- in fact come over the question of race relations and disregard of basic human rights. Over-population,

pollution, nuclear warfare, communism, we may yet deal with; but treating everyone as a human being, with inherent fundamental human rights, regardless of color, may be too much to ask for. The gap between rich and poor, the violence in our society, and the growth and decay of modern urban centers, at base, have to do with race and human relations. The modern city is at the same time a place of hope and a place of despair, and the changes concerning ethnicity and human rights are going to have to come in the city; they will be much longer coming in the rural areas of the country - homogenous as they are.

There are places to look for guidance. The concepts of humanity in the thinking of many native peoples is a place to start. The concern with self, human relations and divine life. First, the concern to use their own initiative and develop their own skills. The response to circumstances, to be spontaneous, to be ourselves. Second, the concern and acceptance of responsibility to the tribe, not only for fighting, but as a support system. Third, the native image of what sort of creature people are and have been, what spirits protect or threaten. A deep sense of realism and concern for simplicity in its finest form, such as death being only the return to nature -- to the mother earth.

Contrast this native way with urban people who have suddenly and violently adapted to an opposite life style; one that isolates and destroys any sense of unity with self and with others. First, urban people are often overcome with the sheer size of the city. They believe that they no longer count, that at a moment notice their home can be swept away by a planner designing a freeway, or worse, can be declared redundant by a business tycoon sitting on the other side of the world. Work is monotonous with no chance for initiative, bound to the rhythm of the machine.

Second, people are no longer responsible to the community - where ever it may be. They are lonely in the middle of a huge crowd. They believe that they do not belong and that nobody cares if they live or die. The individual is not

needed nor is he or she asked to participate in making decisions. Life is controlled by "them," and the only contribution to be made is to "smash things up."

Third, people do not know what their function is, what they are, where they are coming from, or where they are going. There is no coherent picture - no idea of what values they should pursue or what holds society together. People have no purpose, no faith, in others or themselves, and worse yet, they assume no one has any faith in them and that leads to disintegration. As people disintegrate, society disintegrates around them. There is no place for human rights in this picture.

Our present day urban industrial way of life is dying. It is self-destroying - not only for ethnic groups, they are only in the forefront --- why? Because it is based on a view of egocentric people which sees them as a creature of desires and self-gratification --- not as a human being with human rights. We now accept the notion set forth by Peter Drucker called the "marketing concept" --the purpose of industry is no longer to produce goods which are needed by human beings, but rather to create a market. Who needs human rights in the market place?[28]

Ethnicity and human rights should be on the minds of everyone and should be a major concern to all ethnic groups. We all have an ethnic background and we are all human, --we have fundamental human rights, and we cannot count on a hand-full of international organizations to save the day. Ethnicity - human rights - understanding - race relations - are all inter-twined and we had better soon admit we have a problem, or be subject to the adage, if you do not recognize the problem, you are probably part of it.

We need, at a broader level, to begin to think about solutions. Any solution will be difficult and will run the risk of being condemned as simplistic or idealistic. One of the more promising developments to emerge in recent years

is the concept of global education. Defined as the "process of achieving global perspective," global education is gathering supporters in many countries around the world. Jan L. Tucker suggests that by adding international human rights at the base content for global education, the major weakness seen by critics, that is lack of content, is largely removed. Other, and perhaps related content areas are available: food, population, environmental issues, war/peace studies, "...international human rights has an especially important contribution to offer to the content of global education."[29] The addition of ethnicity will add further to the content areas and supplement themes identified by UNESCO in 1974 recommendations concerning appropriate curriculum areas, "the principle of nondiscrimination," and "equality."[30]

In October, 1978, a major conference on teaching human rights was held at the University of Akron, sponsored by the Center for Peace Studies at Akron. Presentation topics included: "Human Rights and Peace Studies," "Teaching Human Rights," "Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy," "Teaching Human Rights in Social Studies Education," "Global Perils, Lifeboat Ethics and the Meaning of Human Rights." The question of content of lack thereof, was not even an issue.[31]

A few months earlier, in June, 1978, a symposium on International Human Rights Education was held at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The meetings focused on international human rights in primary and secondary school programs and in teacher education. Approaches, objectives, principles, strategies, teacher training suggestions were discussed.[32] Thus the ground work and rationale have been laid. The current need is for increased promotion, refinement, and continued development. Florida International University has a grant from the Department of Education designed to incorporate international human rights into general education and professional programs.[33] One more needed addition is the concept of ethnicity.

Ethnic Studies has an important international obligation which, to date,

has been virtually ignored. Nevertheless, education does hold one possible solution in the area of ethnicity and human rights.

One cautionary note regarding education - ethnicity - and human rights must be made. At the 1980 U.N. Sub-Commission on Human Rights meeting, where debate focused on racism and racial discrimination, and was devoted "mainly to a discussion of education in human rights," Patrick Montgomery of the Anti-Slavery Society writes: "...which promises to be a controversial subject, strewn with pitfalls for the unwary. If we are not careful we shall find we have taught people their rights and encouraged them to forget their obligations; or we shall scare them with tales of atrocities or put wrong ideas into their heads; or, lest we do that, refrain from telling them the truth."[34] Watergate, if nothing else, demonstrated the accuracy of the message. As ethnicians, we need to ensure that the debate, the learning, the education, is not distorted. We need to ensure that global internatiocnal human rights education is carried out in the spirit of Paulo Freire's concept of liberation and education not being neutral.

The need for action is pressing. NAIES, from its inception, has been a forward thinking and visionary organization. As a second possible solution to the problems of ethnicity and human rights, the organization should seek NGO status with the United Nations, specifically with ECOSOC. Members should urge executive council members of NAIES to act. The application process is long and cumbersome, but perhaps next time an ethnic representation is made, it can be done under the auspices of NAIES.

In early December, 1980, Amnesty International released its report for 1980, a 408 page report, 110 country-by-country review of human rights.

> Half the countries of the world imprison thousands of people for their political or religious beliefs, and torture, summary trials and execution are common....

No country came away untarnished. Amnesty charged the United States with

> ...police brutality, especially towards members of ethnic minorities, is widespread and severe, resulting in death in many cases. Although it is probably not due to official policy, it is undoubtedly able to occur so frequently because it is officially tolerated.[35]

Can anyone say there is no connection between human rights and ethnicity? How appropriate it would be if in December, 1981, the headline read "World Abuses Cited by NAIES."

FOOTNOTES

[1] Ben Whitaker, Ed., The Fourth World (London, 1972), p. 5.

[2] James H. Williams, "Ethnicity and Human Rights: Raising the National Consciousness," NAIES Newsletter, (October, 1980), Vol. 5, no. 2, p. 19.

[3] Ibid., p. 19.

[4] Benjamin F. Chavis, Human Rights in the United States of America, 1978, p. 2.

[5] Ibid., p. 17. The Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1975, reaffirmed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and pledged implementation of the fundamental freedoms set forth by the United Nations. A review of the Helsinki conference is currently underway in Madrid, Spain, with the Soviet Union attempting to block adoption of an agenda, delaying the conference, hoping for collapse, see, Los Angeles Times, November 11, 1980, part 1, p. 14.

[6] Gerald R. Gill, Meanness Mania: The Changed Mood (Washington, D.C., 1980), p. 1.

[7] Whitaker, The Fourth World, p. 6.

[8] Ibid., p. 6.

[9] Philip Alston, Human Rights and the Basic Needs Strategy for Development (London, 1979), pp. 23-33.

[10] Philip Alston, Making and Breaking Human Rights (London, 1979) p. 1.

[11] Whitaker, The Fourth World, p. 11.

[12] Ibid., p. 9.

[13] Patrick Montgomery, "The Anti-Slavery Society, 1973" reprint from Contemporary Review, (August, 1973), Vol. 223, no 1291, p. 1.

[14] Membership Brochure, Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights.

[15] The Annual Report of the Anti-Slavery Society, 1977-78 (London, 1978), p. 3.

[16] Whitaker, The Fourth World, p. 9.

FOOTNOTES

[17] Ibid., Dustjacket.

[18] Ibid., p. 9.

[19] Ibid., p. 11.

[20] London Observer, May 28, 1961.

[21] Membership Brochure, Amnesty International, p. 2.

[22] Ibid., p. 2.

[23] Ibid., p. 2.

[24] Francis Vergata to Author, October 14, 1970, Personal Files.

[25] Benjamin F. Chavis, Human Rights in the United States of America, 1978, p. 2.

[26] Resolution 1296, Economic and Social Council Resolution on Consultative Arrangements, 23 May 1968, reprint, p. 1.

[27] Patrick Montgomery to Author, 8 May 1979, NAIES Files, Cal Poly, Pomona

[28] Stephen Verney, Into the New Age (Glasgow, 1976), pp. 26-27.

[29] Jan L. Tucker, "International Human Rights: A Content Bridge to a Global Perspective," Global Perspectives, (October, 1980), pp. 3-6.

[30] Ibid., p. 5.

[31] June Burton, Ed., Proceedings, Teaching Human Rights, A Dissemination Conference (Akron, 1978), pp. 1-3.

[32] Tucker, "International Human Rights," Global Perspectives, p. 5.

[33] Ibid., p. 5.

[34] Anti-Slavery Society, Newsletter, (September, 1980), pp. 2-3.

[35] Los Angeles Times, December 10, 1980, "World Abuses Cited by Amnesty International"